

ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR CONGRESSIONAL RELATIONS

December 18, 1959

GUIDELINES

FOR DRAFTING OFFICERS ANSWERING CONGRESSIONAL CORRESPONDENCE

The following Guidelines have been prepared in order to assist drafting officers in handling Congressional correspondence promptly, courteously, and responsively.

Departmental regulations require that Congressional mail be answered within three working days. It is essential that all Departmental officers bear constantly in mind the necessity for maintaining a constructive relationship with Members of Congress. There are a number of factors which enter into the development of such a relationship but none is more essential than the uniform compliance by Departmental officers of the above-cited regulation.

The key official in the effort to meet the three-day time requirement is the drafting officer. While we are constantly seeking methods by which delays in the processes of clearance and transmission within the Department can be reduced, certain delays in this regard are inevitable. Hence, our experience has shown that a Congressional reply will meet the three-day deadline only if the drafting officer gives the incoming letter his immediate attention when it reaches his desk.

The attached Guidelines address themselves to the problems most frequently encountered by drafting officers in the preparation of replies to Congressional letters. Careful study of them, we believe, will make the drafting officer's task easier and avoid subsequent unnecessary delays.

If for any reason a problem is encountered in the preparation of a Congressional reply, the drafting officer should immediately telephone H - Mr. Mitchell K. Stanley. Mr. Stanley may be reached on extensions 4748, 4286 or 4747.

William Macomber

William B. Macomber, Jr.

GUIDE LINES

1. PROMPTNESS: Congressional mail should be answered within three workdays.

If a satisfactory answer cannot be made within this time, the drafting officer should prepare a written interim acknowledgment immediately. This acknowledgment, however, does not mean that there should be any long delay in the substantive reply.

If you ascertain that another Department or Agency has jurisdiction, the letter advising the Member of Congress of this fact should be written promptly and directed to the respective offices of Congressional Relations. A DS-14 should be prepared to accompany the letter.

2. RESPONSIVENESS: Be sure that your answer is responsive.

Do not answer two questions raised in a letter and ignore a third. Do not appear to misinterpret or rephrase a question in a way which makes it easier to answer.

Follow the instructions given by the communication with regard to enclosures and their return. When no instructions are given always return an original letter.

Where information, particularly documentary, is readily available and requires no interpretation, do not tell the Member that he can obtain it from a certain Agency. Instead, inform him that you have requested the Agency to forward it to him, or obtain a copy for inclusion with your reply.

3. CLARITY: Avoid bureaucratic language and overly technical writing.

Particularly avoid the passive tense and long, complicated sentences. Do not use a group of words when one word will do. Make your replies clear and readable. Do not use stereotyped phrases.

Remember that in many cases your letter will be forwarded by the Member of Congress to a constituent who may not have extensive background knowledge of the subject matter discussed in the letter.

4. TONE: Your letter by its tone should carry an implicit recognition of the position of a Member of Congress in the United States Government. Be sure that it is courteous and respectful.

5. LENGTH: A short letter, as long as it is responsive, is always preferable to a long one; and can be dispatched more promptly.

6. NEATNESS: Do not release a letter that is smudgy, has poor erasures, has not been typed on a typewriter with clean type, or has been typed with a worn typewriter ribbon. Be sure the letter is correctly spaced on the page. (See Department's Correspondence Handbook.)

While this point should concern your secretary principally, it is your responsibility as action officer to see that this is done.

7. OPENING: Do not use "Reference is made to..."

Avoid stereotyped opening sentences such as "The receipt is acknowledged...." but mention the subject and date of the incoming communication, as well as the date and manner (i.e., by telephone, by letter) of any interim acknowledgment.

Avoid use of date of incoming letter with date of enclosure if it highlights delay by Member.

Do not refer to receiving the letter from a member of the Congressman's staff (except under circumstances when the Member of Congress is ill or out of the country) since you should consider any request of this nature as coming from the Member himself.

Should the incoming communication be a form letter, a referral or transmittal slip, it should always be referred to as "your communication" in the body of the letter.

8. CLOSING: Never close letters abruptly and always use some type of courtesy close.

Make the courtesy close consistent with the nature of the reply. If it is negative, do not say: "If I can be of any further assistance, please feel free to call on me."

9. REVIEW: Always go over the correspondence before passing it on.

Be sure that the response meets the foregoing requirements. Particularly satisfy yourself that the reply is accurate, courteous, responsive, and written in a clear, readable style.

When the reply leaves your desk, be sure that all the relevant papers, including any previous replies are included.

10. CLEARANCES: Delays in dispatching replies to Congressional correspondence are often the result of excessive time lost in the clearance process. Drafting officers should obtain telephone clearances wherever this is feasible. Otherwise experience has shown that the reply is delayed approximately one day beyond the date it is drafted for each clearance that is required.

If telephone clearances are not feasible because of the complexity or importance of the subject matter of the reply, it is requested that, in addition to listing the office clearance symbol on the blue copy, the drafting officer also list the name of the clearing officer, if it is known. Otherwise additional time is lost before the reply reaches the appropriate clearing officer.